

SOCIAL SCIENCE, SUBJECTIVISM, AND THE ART OF THINKING

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

SEVERAL stimulating books, recently published, revive for much-needed illumination an old question of the utmost importance. The authors, it is true, imagine that the question is new, but that is a small matter. Their mistake discloses lack of familiarity with the works of "some eminent Victorians," but those works did not settle the question, and it demands reopening and reconsideration from the viewpoint of modern psychology and modern sociological generalizations.

The question is this: Is there such a thing as a political, social or economic *science*? Do not our passions, prejudices, interests, fears, hopes, conscious and unconscious, preclude the sort of treatment—rigorous, unbiased, exact, patient—which the term "science" denotes? If not, how does it happen that in the so-called social sciences there is little respect for authority, little unity or harmony, little effort to know what is established and demonstrated, little faith, indeed, in the very possibility of establishing and proving theories or propositions? Why do "practical" men entertain such contempt for the social sciences, and why do we so often hear the objection that this or that proposal is "only theoretical" and will not work? In the true and exact sciences there is no distinction between theoretical and practical truth. There is no scientific truth that is not borne out in practice.

On the other hand, if the so-called social sciences are not sciences at all, what prevents them from being such? Bias, interest, prepossession, tradition? Is it difficult or well-nigh impossible for economists, ethicists, professors of politics and civics, historians, to put aside class, partisan, race and other prejudices? Are all the conclusions of the pseudo sciences named "subjective," questionable, tainted? If so, how can we hope ever to have social sciences?

John A. Hobson, the radical British economist and publicist, in his book entitled *Free Thought in the Social Sciences* faces frankly the difficulties just indicated and urges a change of procedure on the part of the workers in the social sciences. Instead of ignoring bias, of tacitly assuming that it has been somehow exorcised by writers, M. Hobson advises *recognition of inevitable bias* and making proper allowance for it. We should take it for granted, in other words, that an aristocrat will fall a victim to the "aristocratic fallacy"; that a member of the middle class will overrate the virtues of his class and make generalizations that are not justified by the experience of the wage-workers, or the poor farmers and their poorer tenants, of the struggling professional men and impecunious intellectuals; and, finally, that a trade-unionist will be incapable of treating fairly and soberly proposals advanced by employers or by thinkers who take the employer's view of industrial problems. If we do this, we can openly discount the statements made and accept them not at par, but at their actual value. In the end, the hypothesis is, the sum of such duly discounted assertions and affirmations will furnish material for a true science.

Unfortunately, it is easier to propose this method than to apply it. What is a proper discount in any of the cases given for illustration? Will not bias *enter into the determination of the discount*? As a matter of fact, it is simply untrue to say that we have ignored bias and treated it as non-existent. We have always complained of bias, conscious and unconscious, in alleged contributions to social theory by writers closely associated with or dependent upon vested interests. The defense of rent by landlords has always been discounted, as has the defense of high protection by its immediate beneficiaries, or of expropriation of property by "proletarian" economists, or of religious education in schools by clerical and dogmatic theologians.

How, then, are we to arrive at truth in connection with the problems of the social sciences? Common sense is quite ready to give a satisfactory answer. We must hear all sides, weigh all considerations, compare conclusions, and verify and reverify them wherever possible. We must endeavor to "see life steadily and see it whole," and not depend unduly on books. We must watch and interpret tendencies and facts. In addition, there are always, happily, some indisputably disinterested thinkers who rise above class and caste prejudices and reveal a passion for justice and pure truth. The leaders of a reform movement are not necessarily members of the

class or group in whose behalf the movement is planned and carried on. The special pleaders are not necessarily beneficiaries of the institution or practice they seek to defend against the assaults of outsiders. Things social are not as simple as the foe of bias is apt to imagine. Intellectual integrity, imagination, sympathy, love of accuracy and straight thinking have played no unimportant parts in advancing the social sciences and in promoting sound social improvements. The industrial and political reforms of the last fifty years—for example, legal recognition of trade unionism, accident compensation, collective bargaining, the enfranchisement of the working classes and of women, progressive income and inheritance taxation, the initiative and referendum, the direct primary, commission government, the city manager plan, profit-sharing, employe ownership of stock in corporations, and the like, have been conceived and achieved *despite the opposition of prejudiced and interest-blinded groups and factions*. If bias has not been fatal to progress in the past, it cannot be fatal to healthy future progress. Bias may retard wholesome progress, but does not prevent it. In the unceasing conflict of social forces and rival interests, propaganda, misrepresentation, exaggeration, misunderstanding born of suspicion and dislike are severally inevitable, but in the end adjustments and compromises are effected under the direction of reason rather than of emotion.

The real difficulty under which the social sciences labor is the extremely limited opportunity of experimentation and verification which they enjoy. Human life is not a laboratory. Propositions and hypotheses cannot be tested in politics or in economic relations as chemical, physical and other hypotheses are tested. There are object lessons in history and in contemporaneous experience, but it is impossible to prevent divergent interpretations of them. The deepest thinkers have admitted that the baffling complexity of social phenomena enjoin a wholesome suspicion of severe logic and of the geometrical method of demonstration in that realm. Nothing really repeats itself in human life; there are always new factors, subtle and imponderable, that "make a difference" and forbid the confident drawing of parallels. Ancient Greece cannot teach us how to govern the heterogeneous American democracy, spread over a vast continent. The Swiss Referendum somehow does not always work effectively in the United States. Institutions and principles are not eternal, but correlated with, and dependent upon, time, place, char-

acter of the population, educational status, tradition and background. We must reckon with these facts, not blink them.

Compare the fate of discoveries or new theories in the exact sciences with the fate of sociological theories. How was Mendel's theory of heredity established? By controlled observation, experimentation, verification. How was the doctrine of Relativity demonstrated? By sundry careful and painstaking observations and tests. But let the great majority of criminologists advocate the abolition of capital punishment, and what happens? A minority challenges their conclusion and demands the sort and quality of proof that cannot be furnished by social science. Argue that capital punishment is futile, non-deterrent, brutalizing, and you are told that your notions are arbitrary. The facts you offer are rejected as insufficient, or irrelevant, or both. No two states or countries are similar in every respect, and no state or country is static. The opponents of any change insist that "conditions" justify a given law in one case and preclude it in another.

For a century or more economists have argued the question of free trade vs. protection. The majority of the professors of social economies everywhere are free-traders, but the protectionist minority is unconverted and unashamed. Protection still claims its fervent and erudite defenders. Statistics leave these Tories, or heretics, cold. The same figures are often used by both sides to prove diametrically opposite conclusions.

In these circumstances, it is perfectly "human" and natural that the average man, the business man, the self-styled practical man, should turn a deaf ear to academic thinkers whose teachings, if carried into effect, would reduce his profits, lessen his power or affect his prestige. Our consciences are very elastic, and we readily find justifications or excuses for our action or inaction. What better excuse is there than this—that "the doctors disagree"; that the supposed scientific authorities are divided on the question which concerns us and in respect of which this or that school of thought demands of us conduct inimical to our interests and contrary to our inclinations?

Indeed, a recent writer, H. Ward, in a clever and plausible book on "Thobbing"—a term coined by him to denote what has been called "rationalizing," or the formation of opinions and beliefs by so-called reasoning that is not reasoning at all, but the more or less deliberate use of sophistry to justify prejudices and borrowed dogmas—proves to his own satisfaction that even the greatest philoso-

phers and most iconoclastic thinkers seek to palm off, as it were, in the name of reason, personal opinions, born of emotions and desires, for which they furnish little or no evidence worthy of the name. According to Mr. Ward, even the Pragmatists and the Behaviorists are guilty of thobbing: at a certain stage in their respective arguments they lose sight of scientific method, of their own alleged postulates and premises, and advance astonishing conclusions in no wise established by the preceding argument. Mr. Ward is not so naive as to believe that every proposition in the social sciences is capable of rigorous demonstration, but he objects to the tacit assumption that thobbing is a satisfactory substitute for thinking, or that the social sciences are free to dispense with scientific proof to the end of time while claiming to be classed with the real sciences. He would distinguish between thinking and thobbing, and draw a clear, bold line between the two processes. An author of a work on ethics, or economics, or government, might for example, serve notice upon his readers that thinking has ended and thobbing begun at a certain natural division in the argument or exposition! Or, if the author does not know where the line is to be drawn, he might submit his work to a critic and ask him to identify and label the propositions that have only thobbing back of them.

We are brought here, in all seriousness, to consideration of a very different sort of book on some aspects of the problems raised by Messrs. Hobson and Ward. The reference is to Prof. Graham Wallas's much-lauded volume entitled *The Art of Thought*, a volume which has been commended to educators, to psychologists and to would-be reformers of society as a preventive of hasty generalizations and sweeping indictments or wholesale apologies for certain institutions or practices.

Mr. Wallas says many thought-provoking things, and his analysis of the process of thought is useful up to a certain point. But, as we shall see, and as Prof. John Dewey has very candidly shown, Mr. Wallas overlooks a very vital fact and is led by that strange oversight—especially strange in a writer on political and social questions—to commit serious errors.

We do not, according to Mr. Wallas, teach the art of thought in our schools and colleges. Yet thought is an art, and much of it is understandable and teachable. If this supremely important art were properly taught, fewer fallacies would be socially current, the wicked propagandist would meet with more difficulties than he now en-

counters, and the path of the wise and righteous would be correspondingly smoother and freer.

To show just how the art of thought, or of straight, clear, logical thinking, can be taught, Mr. Wallas separates the process of thought into four distinct phases—namely, Preparation, or the period of accumulating knowledge and correctly classifying it; Incubation, the period of deliberate abstention from work on the material obtained and mastered; Illumination, or the period during which ideas, flashes of insight and of new theory appear, and, finally, Verification, a period of uncertain length dependent upon the quality and boldness of the theory or conception tentatively reached.

It scarcely needs saying that Mr. Wallas realizes the impossibility of controlling or teaching either *incubation* or *illumination*. But he rightly holds that we *can* be taught how to gather, digest and classify data, how to demand sufficient and adequate data on any subject under consideration, and how to verify, test and reverify. Since, however, the importance of the incubation and illumination stages is admittedly greater than that of the other two stages, the conclusion emerges that the real art of thought cannot be made a matter of systematic teaching. Mr. Wallas himself affirms that much of the success of original thinkers—a Darwin, a Wallace, an Einstein, a Pasteur, a Koch—is due to their ability to grasp and hold the vague intimations, the adumbrations, the rays of faint light which mark the phase of illumination.

Mr. Wallas' book, however, is open to the deeper criticism candidly passed upon it by Professor Dewey, who, in a notice of that work in *The New Republic*, wrote as follows:

" . . . It is obvious that there is an art of thought with respect to matters of physical science or technology. What is lacking is simply an art of thought with respect to human affairs comparable with that already attained in physical matters. This contrast raises an interesting problem, probably the most important problem which the world now faces. Is there a legitimate possibility of an art of social thought which is one with increase of control, or is the idea a dream? If it is a legitimate possibility, how is it to be realized?

Such a question, however, is in no sense a psychological problem. The development of natural science is not due to the fact that individual thinkers have learned a better intimately personal art of managing their own thoughts. It is due to the formation of an objective technique of instruments and external procedures together with the accumulation of prior results which direct from without

the growth of pertinent problems and fruitful hypotheses. But it is the personal and psychological problem alone with which Mr. Wallas deals. There is no approach to a consideration of the political and economic conditions which stand in social affairs in the way of the development of methods of objective intellectual behavior employing means which almost automatically direct the thoughts of individuals as such."

It is not a sufficient answer to Prof. Dewey's remarks to say that Mr. Wallas was not concerned with objective control of thought that is too prone to err subjectively. It was his business to emphasize the contrast between the position and the authority of the exact sciences with the treatment and lack of authority of the social sciences, and to give some explanation of the disquieting phenomenon. It was his business to ask why the art of thought is so effectively and fruitfully applied in one realm and so poorly and haltingly applied in another.

We find ourselves back at the starting point—at the question whether the part played by bias and prejudice, fear and desire, in the treatment of social, political, economic and moral issues cannot be controlled and diminished.

There are shallow radicals who assert that "capitalism" is the foe of free, disinterested thought and searching, fearless investigation of the themes of the social sciences. Books have been written on the efforts of plutocracy to direct college and university teaching, to suppress new truth because it may undermine monopoly or promote revolutionary tendencies. That such efforts have been and still are occasionally made, no intelligent observer would care to deny. But we have had enough experience with compulsory communism, sovietism, dictatorship of the proletariat, Fascismo, and brutal reaction *sans phrase*, to perceive that bias and resistance to honest, unfettered discussion are by no means the exclusive sins of "capitalism." If we had Socialism or Syndicalism tomorrow, bias would be as rampant and injurious in the social sciences as it is today, or as it was under autocracy and clerical obscurantism.

The question is not of an age or a given social condition. It cannot be solved by artificial "controls." And, to repeat, Mr. Hobson's suggestions in regard to allowances or discounts for bias do not take us far on the way to a solution.

What is to be done, then? In the absence of a specific, we have no choice but to accept the solution of common sense, which, as already pointed out, is this—that we must peg away patiently, hear

all sides, take time for reflection, watch developments, profit by experiments wherever possible, seek guidance in quarters that are apparently free from bias, or as free as is humanly possible. We are bound to believe that in the long run the truth does prevail even in politics and economics, or in international controversies, despite national bias, class bias, religious bias, purse bias, race bias, etc. In thus believing we are not necessarily guilty of "thobbing," for we are able to point to numerous facts and instances in support of our position. After all, Adam Smith did influence very considerably human thought and action, as did Jeremy Bentham, as did Richard Cobden, as did Luther, as did the American Abolitionists, as did other groups and individual thinkers and leaders at various periods of human history, to say nothing of law-givers like Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha. After all, moral progress is a fact, not a mere theory. Political equality, industrial democracy, humanization of the treatment of the insane, the defectives, and the criminal, exemplify moral and social progress. Restriction of child labor, the shorter work-day, popular education, international arbitration, leagues and courts for the prevention of aggressive warfare—these things, and a hundred others, spell and represent genuine progress. Political economy, sociology, ethics, criminology, history, have done *something*—no one knows how much—to promote those great human improvements. Other factors have aided, no doubt, but ideas have not been futile, have not fallen on deaf ears. There is thus no ground for excessive pessimism concerning the work of the social sciences. They are not without honor and weight in human affairs. They will probably command increasing respect and authority as education spreads, as tradition loses its hold, as we learn to trace the genesis and development of institutions and doctrines, and to discuss every belief in a scientific spirit. Lawmakers and reformers alike will learn to value the opinions and theories of economists and sociologists, and consult them more and more when framing statutes. Democracies will not tolerate the *dictatorships* of experts and scholars, but they will accept *the advice and guidance* of experts in the domain of political and social legislation as they now accept the guidance of engineers, physicians and chemists in certain fields.

And that is all that sensible men can ask or expect. It is quite enough, however, to save democracy and avert either anarchy or absolutism.

If democracy can be saved by discussion, reason, intelligence, tolerant compromise, gradual improvements where needed and justified, as it undoubtedly can, then it follows that western civilization and culture are likewise reclaimable and redeemable. Dr. Oswald Spengler, the erudite German scholar who has taken all knowledge for his province, and who, after surveying the diplomacy, politics, theology, philosophy, economic systems, arts and crafts of the West announces the *decline and fall* of the whole organism of western civilization, seems to have fallen into the error of all fundamentalists and dogmatists. He has overlooked the one distinctive characteristic of modern thought, the characteristic that makes all talk of decay and death futile and unimpressive, namely, its relativity and elasticity. We no longer believe that because this or that institution disappears, or evolves, society is doomed and humanity irretrievably lost. Autocracy is dead; industrial tyranny is dead or dying; religious dogmas and superstitions are dead; morality is being reshaped and provided with new sanctions; the arts are making bizarre and ingenious experiments; but none of these radical movements or accomplished revolutionary facts imperil *the fabric of human culture and civilization*. Dr. Spengler's definitions of culture and civilization are obviously arbitrary. It is really absurd to imagine that Pragmatism in philosophy—a movement, by the way, already considerably modified by critical realism and other schools—or Cezanne and his followers in Art, or Psychoanalysis, or self-determination and autonomy in politics, are symptoms of decay and death.

That is civilization which makes for the full development of human faculty within limits prescribed by reason and the necessity of considering the rights and claims of one's fellowmen. We are slowly building up a moral system, a civilization, worthy of the name. We are socializing the individual and at the same time teaching organized society, or the State, to respect the socialized individual. We are humanizing industry, abolishing unfair privilege, equalizing opportunity, increasing leisure, reducing armaments, restricting warfare, curbing fanatical nationalism, democratizing culture and knowledge. These tendencies *strengthen* a civilization instead of undermining it.

Moreover, the East is imitating the West. China and Japan are borrowing western ideas and institutions. If western civilization were going to the dogs, eastern civilization would accompany it. All humanity is in the same boat, as it were, engaged in the same quest

and adventure. No race of people has a monopoly of virtue, spirituality, science, or art. All races are brothers or sisters of one another. The same thoughts and standards that will "save" the West will save the East, and in exactly the same way. Peace, justice, order, co-operation, education, pursuit of science and the fine arts in freedom—these are the conditions of progress in civilization everywhere and always.

Dr. Spengler unwittingly illustrates in his portentous and formidable work the unscientific character of much of our speculation in the realm of sociology, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. His premises are widely questioned, while his conclusions do not even necessarily flow from his premises. Mr. Ward would find more thobbing than thinking in Spengler's volumes, while Mr. Hobson and others would find plenty of bias and unconscious prejudice there, as well as personal crotchets and whimsicalities. Well, there is no immediate help for it. The social sciences are not and never will be rigorously exact, and human affairs will always be baffling and perplexing. But time, tide, experience and criticism somehow contrive to separate truth from error, fact from fancy and illusion. We have *some* light, and it shows us both the dim goal and the uneven, thorny path thereto.